




## Adolescents: Discipline with the Brain in Mind

The root word of discipline is “disciple” and it means a follower of a *teacher*. The definition of “discipline” then, involves *learning*. If we are to be truly effective in helping misbehaving adolescents learn prosocial life skills and make better behavioral choices in the future, it is important to understand some basic neurology as it relates to the brain’s inherent social/emotional capacities and needs, and adolescent brain development. Below is a brief overview of how some relevant neurological functions can influence adolescent behavior and how our understanding of how the brain functions can help us be more effective when disciplining adolescent students.

### ***Keep a Students’ Level of Social/Emotional Competency in Mind:***

Research indicates the human brain is hardwired for only six primary emotions—the rest need to be taught. Eric Jensen likens it to a keyboard that represents a range of emotions, where some youth can only play a narrow range of notes. (See Figure below.) This is especially true for students who live in economic poverty who may not have access to enriching experiences with positive adult role models. It might also be true for students who live in affluence, but are deprived of adequate time and attention from supportive adults.



Hardwired Emotions	Learned Emotions that Must Be Taught
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sadness</li> <li>• Joy</li> <li>• Disgust</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Surprise</li> <li>• Fear</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Compassion</li> <li>• Humility</li> <li>• Optimism</li> <li>• Forgiveness</li> <li>• Sympathy</li> <li>• Cooperation</li> <li>• Patience</li> <li>• Gratitude</li> <li>• Shame</li> </ul>

*Some teachers may interpret students’ emotional and social deficits as a lack of respect or manners, but it is more accurate and helpful to understand that the students come to school with a narrower range of appropriate emotional responses than we expect. The truth is that many children simply don’t have the repertoire of necessary responses. It is as though their brains’ “emotional keyboards” play only a few notes.... Every proper response that you don’t see at your school is one that you need to be teaching.... To shift your own responses to inappropriate behavior, reframe your thinking: expect students to be impulsive, to blurt inappropriate language, and to act ‘disrespectful’ until you teach them stronger social and emotional skills and until the social conditions at your school make it attractive not to do those things [emphasis in original].*

— Jensen, 2009

### ***Social/Emotional Competency—Implications for Discipline:***

If we understand that students’ social/emotional deficits reflect “unlearned skills” rather than a desire to be disruptive, rude, or other wise confrontational, it can help us depersonalize what might otherwise feel like a personal attack or challenge—and avoid getting drawn into a power struggle. It helps us keep the focus on teaching the needed skill in much the same way that we remediate a child’s inability to read or to swim.

- Do not personalize students’ challenging behavior. All behavior reflects a student’s positive intent to meet their basic needs (including their social/emotional needs), given the knowledge and skills they currently have. Offensive and counter productive strategies reflect a deficient skill set.
- Model the emotional management skills we want our students to learn throughout the disciplinary process. Students learn as much (or more) from what we model as from what we teach!
- Incorporate a teaching and learning component into the disciplinary process. Consequences alone are not an effective means to promote authentic, intrinsically motivated behavioral change. We need to enlarge students’ “emotional keyboard” by encouraging reflection and teaching alternative ways they can meet their social/emotional needs.

### ***Keep the Brain's Hardwired Social/Emotional Needs in Mind:***

The brain relates to a variety of social/emotional needs in much the same way as it relates to its need for food and water—by activating the brain's reward system if the need is met and the brain's threat circuitry if it is in jeopardy of not being met. Below are a number of social/emotional needs that are particularly relevant to disciplinary situations, along with implications to promote a successful intervention. A perceived threat to any of the hardwired social/emotional needs below will increase student defensiveness, reduce motivation to comply, damage relationships and connectedness to school, and inhibit learning.

<b>Social/Emotional Needs</b>	<b>Hardwired Social/Emotional Needs — Implications for Discipline</b>
<b>Safety:</b> Feeling physically and emotionally safe	Treat students with respect in words and actions throughout the disciplinary process.
<b>Belonging/Connectedness:</b> Caring relationships in a supportive community where your contributions and potential are valued	Let students know you care about them and they are valued members of the school community. Give them a “way back.”
<b>Predictability:</b> Ability to predict patterns and outcomes	Use a consistent and predictable discipline system of graduated consequences that begin mild and escalate to more severe based upon potential for harm and repeated offenses.
<b>Autonomy/Self-Efficacy:</b> Ability to exert control over outcomes in your life	Avoid power struggles by not engaging in confrontational or manipulative behaviors (e.g., yelling, threatening, coercing, intimidating, demeaning, sarcasm, finger-wagging, lecturing).
<b>Fairness:</b> Being treated without bias or injustice	Apply similar consequences for similar behaviors without modification up or down based upon the student's history of behavior or special status. Reserve school exclusion for the most severe offenses and issues of safety.
<b>Learning:</b> Increasing competence and mastery	Facilitate learning into the disciplinary process so the student can develop more effective skills and strategies to achieve goals and solve problems.

### ***Keep the Adolescent Brain's Developmental Timetable in Mind:***

Because adolescents *look* like adults, it would be easy to expect adolescents to *act* like adults. However, anyone who has worked with teens know they do *not* act like adults! That is because even though their brains and bodies may have achieved adult proportions, their brains are *not* fully matured. They are very much “under construction.” The human brain goes through two major developmental periods that are often characterized by challenging and difficult behaviors.—with the first occurring around the age of two and the second occurring during adolescence. The following aspects of normal adolescent brain development have a significant impact on young people's behavior and carry major implications for how we think about adolescents' behavior and discipline their misbehavior:

- The frontal lobes of the adolescent brain are not fully mature. The area of the brain that is responsible for higher order thinking, including foreseeing consequences, impulse control, and emotional regulation is not fully developed until the mid 20s.
- The adolescent brain responds more strongly from its emotional center (the amygdala) than from its frontal lobes, making it highly sensitive to perceived threat and reactive to other's emotions.
- The adolescent brain is likely to misread emotions, such as fear or surprise, and perceive them as anger.

***Adolescent Brain Development — Implications for Discipline:*** The importance of the role of the frontal lobes cannot be overstated with respect to the modulating effect they have on the brain's emotional and reactive amygdala.

- Do *not* be surprised nor take it personally when teens misbehave, test limits, talk without thinking, and behave impulsively. Their frontal lobes are not yet fully “on line.”
- Administer discipline with a neutral feeling tone in order to avoid escalation and to focus on helping students *learn* from their mistakes. The immature brain is hypersensitive to perceived threat and if they perceive threatening emotions such as blaming, judging, or anger, they are more likely to

### ***Summary:***

Students' brains are literally changing every day—and the way we interact with them either enhances or impairs its cognitive and social/emotional development. The question is not “*Will I make a difference?*” The question is, “*What kind of difference will I make?*” They learn something from everything we say and do. Keeping the following questions in mind when disciplining a student can help guide your words and actions like a compass: “*What am I teaching the student my interaction with them?*” “*What do I want them to learn?*” “*How can I best help them learn that?*”